

Privacy and anonymity in the age of social media – are they possible?

A Pre-reading

1 Take a moment to consider what privacy and anonymity mean to you.

Privacy means...

Anonymity means...

2

a) Find definitions for these words in a dictionary and write them down.

The dictionary definition of “privacy” is

The dictionary definition of “anonymity” is

b) What were the similarities or differences to the things you came up with in exercise 1?

3 Do privacy and anonymity mean the same when you relate them to social media and our digital world?

B Now read the text and answer the questions at the end.

In order to understand what other people thought about privacy and anonymity, I asked a few friends to help me. It made them think about something that they hadn't really thought about before. Yes, they knew about protecting their passwords and deleting their cache when they had been on the internet, but the more we spoke the more it got them thinking. Here is what a few of them said during our conversations.



Pete said, “Privacy is too big to understand.” He added that privacy is far too small a word to describe what we talk about when we talk about the mining, transmission, storing, buying, selling, use and misuse of our personal information.

When asked what anonymity is, I got this reply from someone, who wishes to remain anonymous: “The term ‘anonymity’ comes from the Greek word ‘anonymia’, meaning ‘without a name’ and its use nowadays has basically kept to this original definition.

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Often, however, the term refers to the sorts of protection that non-identity provides. In the internet environment, we are learning that every action may be tracked and stored for an indefinite amount of time. This means the term ‘anonymity’ has taken on new weight and become the centre of a great deal of controversy and debate.”

Both privacy and anonymity are rolled into one by Johanna, although she was referring mostly to privacy. “It is about being able to define for ourselves who we are for the world and on our own terms. That’s not a choice that belongs to social media or the internet.”

Clare stated her fears by saying, “Control of our lives is being taken away in ways both large and small. It may be as simple as using your browsing behaviour to push you towards buying a particular pair of shoes or it may be as potentially life-altering as the inability to get a new job.”

The American Civil Liberties Union (one of the most important independent groups fighting for civil rights and privacy) reports that our privacy is shrinking every day. Protecting our privacy or anonymity doesn’t just mean changing a password; it means recognizing there are private surveillance databases that have reports on regular citizens which are sold to the highest bidder.

A famous author, who is just about to have his tenth novel published, was able to maintain his privacy for a long time. People thought he was just like the main characters in his books. Then he started doing interviews for magazines and appearing on TV. This is what he said about the price of fame and the resulting invasions of his privacy, “I thought it was fun at first, talking to all these people, having my picture taken and appearing on TV. But then the fun stopped. After a year everything changed. I suddenly realized that my identity – my real identity, that is – was being changed by the story that the press was feeding to the public. So every time I met someone for the first time, I knew that they would already ‘know’ so much about me – a lot of which wasn’t true – and that is what I had real problems understanding and accepting.”

Video surveillance

In Manhattan there are three cameras on the roof of a restaurant which film people while they are eating their lunch or just walking by each day. The material from the cameras is streamed publicly online.

As an experiment, a group of people turned the cameras into a facial-recognition-powered tracking system. They used a service that costs less than \$100 and is available to the public. What is really frightening is that the whole thing was legal. They collected public images of people who worked near the restaurant and matched them to the pictures from the cameras. Through this they could find out more about these people. Researchers have said that if you’re an adult in America, there is more than a 50% chance that you are in some law enforcement facial recognition database. The group spoke to one of the ‘matched’ people and his reaction was, “Oh my God, I can’t believe what you have done. I couldn’t believe how simple it was to recognize someone and make a match. I had trouble recognizing myself on the picture from the camera.”



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The popular artist, Banksy, is one person who has somehow managed to keep his anonymity in this digital age. Obviously, there are some people who must know who he is – family and friends – but for most of the world only his graffiti is known. He has an Instagram account, posts comments and also makes videos, but still people can't put a face to the name. He is an example of how, in this age of social media, you can become famous but still stay anonymous – if you want to – which most stars don't want for themselves even though they try to keep their partners and children out of the limelight.

C Tasks

1 How anonymous are you? What do you do to protect your privacy? Do you think your activities are 'traced' on the internet or when you are walking through town?

2 In groups make a list of your activities on the internet. Think about these things:

- Where do you shop online?
- What social media sites do you belong to?
- Which messaging system do you use?
- Which apps do you use for watching films, listening to music or finding information?
- How often do you change your password and clear your cache?

3 How big is the digital footprint you leave on the internet? Think of examples.


Do you post pictures of places you have been to on social media or search sites? Do you let a program track your movement during the day? Do you upload photos of yourself and others or post tutorials or videos? Are you registered with a company that gives you points for buying certain products from particular vendors? How many e-mail addresses do you have?


4 Present the activities you listed in exercise 2 to your class. Relate these activities to how you think they make you leave a digital footprint behind you. (How) Can you change this?

Teacher's page

Links

<https://projekte.berlinergazette.de/are-we-up-for-anonymity/> 

<https://sites.google.com/site/cs181anonymity/definition> 

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/anonymity> 

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/privacy> 

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/privacy.html> 